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SUBJECT: DHS SECRETARY CHERTOFF IN MEXICO, FEBRUARY 15-16:
MEETINGS WITH INTERIOR, TREASURY OFFICIALS

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ACCORDINGLY.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Secretary Chertoff's February 15 meetings with GOM Interior (Gobernacion) officials occasioned broad-ranging discussions of ongoing bilateral cooperation and yielded several specific proposals to broaden it, including:

--A commitment to work together closely in shaping and implementing a strategy to control Mexico's southern border;

--A commitment to strengthen and expand the Border Violence Protocols;

--A proposal to expand and strengthen the Border Violence Protocols by extending the program along the length of the U.S. - Mexican border and deepening tactical intelligence exchanges;

--An offer to improve the Interior Repatriation Program by including "at-risk" travelers and Central American illegals;

--An effort to encourage the GOM to broaden biometric data sharing by capturing finger-print data on incoming airline passengers;

--An offer to exchange information with Mexico on contingency planning concerning a possible mass migration from Cuba after Castro's death; and

--A request that Mexico consider requiring visas of Venezuelan travelers.

¶2. (SBU) Secretary Chertoff first met with officials from Mexico's Ministry of Interior. Headed by Secretary Ramirez Acuna, it consisted of representatives from the ministry's bureau of population, migration, and religious affairs, the chief and representatives from Mexico's intelligence agency (CISEN), the head of the National Migration Institute (INAMI), the new Undersecretary for North American Affairs from the Foreign Ministry, and Mexican Customs Commissioner.

¶3. (SBU) The nearly two-hour meeting covered 1) immigration; 2) Mexico's southern border strategy; 3) the Border Violence Protocols; 4) repatriation of Mexican and third country nationals; 5) biometric data exchanges; and 6)

Cuba and Venezuela.

Migration: U.S. Temp Worker Plan Possible, But Controls Necessary

14. (SBU) Both Ramirez Acuna and the Secretary lauded the close bilateral relationship, underscored shared concerns, and stressed the priority President Calderon attaches to strengthening cooperation in law enforcement, migration, and border security. Secretary Chertoff commended President Calderon's recent law and order initiatives and provided an overview of his chief concerns: trans-border terrorism, organized narco-crime, and illegal migration. Concerning the latter, he noted his hope that a stronger Mexican economy would help stem flows of illegal migrants to the U.S. Secretary Chertoff stressed President Bush's continued

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commitment to a temporary worker program (TWP) in the United States and underscored the need to control who enters the U.S. across our southern border, both as a matter of public security and to build public support for TWP. He said that in the coming months the United States Government would continue to take measures to secure the border, even as it moves forward with immigration reform. He himself would be leading a high profile effort to strengthen controls against illegal immigration in coming weeks, he advised his counterparts.

Southern Border: Give us a Plan and a POC

15. (SBU) At the same time, the Secretary noted, we are

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concerned by illegal migrants from third countries passing through Mexico to the United States and the vulnerabilities to criminal elements such traffic posed to both the U.S. and Mexico. We are interested in working with Mexico to develop strategies to attack smugglers, get at their organizations, and target their money. The U.S., he stressed, wants to help Mexico secure its own southern border and is eager to hear how the GOM plans to do so.

16. (SBU) Ramirez Acuna and his team (gladly) outlined their view of the problem, stressing its regional socioeconomic roots: poorly performing Central American economies and persistent social problems created the impetus for migrant flows northward to and through Mexico. These problems, compounded by the region's rugged physical environment, create the conditions in which illegality festers. Ultimately, they need to be addressed broadly. For now, Mexico needs not only a better analytic handle on illegal activities in the south, it needs to concentrate resources in key areas such as the formal and "informal" ports of entry along the Guatemalan border, as well as on the isthmus of Tehuantepec, a natural choke point for smugglers of illegal people and goods.

17. (SBU) Secretary Chertoff responded by saying the U.S. was willing to support a strategic plan. He would take the GOM's broad view of the problem back to Washington and explore how we might concentrate our intelligence and law enforcement resources in support of a plan. He asked Ramirez Acuna to identify a principal point of contact for the GOM's southern border strategy and promised to do the same within DHS. CISEN Director Guillermo Valdes would coordinate this effort for Mexico, Ramirez Acuna said.

Border Violence Protocols: Expand Tactical Cooperation

¶8. (SBU) Turning to the Border Violence Protocols, Ramirez Acuna said the experience of the past year has been very positive. Mexico is pulling together the police elements necessary to better secure its northern frontier in a climate of heightened violence. Mexico wanted to expand the Protocols along the length of the border, he said. CISEN head Valdes seconded this, saying that the visit of the Chief of the Border Patrol, David Aguilar, underscored the utility of the mechanism. He suggested that the United States and Mexico might even broaden the program's focus. Tightened U.S. security along the border was likely increasing the propensity for violence in the area, Valdes said, as criminal organizations challenged the growing effectiveness of government efforts to repress their activities. Valdes assured Secretary Chertoff that CISEN would develop a strategic approach to analyzing and countering growing violence along the border and welcomed engaging a counterpart USG element in this regard.

¶9. (SBU) Secretary Chertoff agreed that criminal organizations would likely turn to violence to defend their activities, and said that President Calderon had correctly focused on border violence. He concurred that the U.S. and Mexico should expand the Border Violence Protocols. On greater intelligence sharing, he submitted that such exchanges should be driven by operational concerns with emphasis placed on improving immediate response capability through better coordination between field commanders on both sides of the border.

Repatriations: Two Programs Compared

¶10. (SBU) GOM representatives lead this discussion with an assessment of Mexican measures to coordinate repatriations of illegal Central American migrants. Close engagement with Central American governments, through a series of bilateral accords, allowed for "rapid, agile, large-scale" repatriations with minimal problems, argued INAMI Commissioner Cecilia Romero. SRE Under Secretary for North America Carlos Rico then called for an evaluation of voluntary repatriations of illegal Mexican nationals from the

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United States based on such "best practices." While he called the U.S.-Mexico Interior Repatriation (IR) program successful overall, he argued for improvement in some aspects, such as consular access. He also took the opportunity to comment on recent cases of violence against Mexican nationals in the United States, noting his government's frustration with the lack of follow-up in investigations.

¶11. (SBU) On the issue of violence against Mexican nationals, Secretary Chertoff stressed the professionalism of Border Patrol agents, their training, and the rules of engagement under which they operate. However, he noted, agents face a constant barrage of attacks, ranging from rock throwing to incidents of far greater severity, and Mexico should understand their need to defend themselves appropriately. Referring to the IR program, he acknowledged room for improvement and offered two suggestions. First, he urged Mexican authorities to allow the program to expand to include at-risk illegal travelers such as the aged, infirm, and incapacitated, even when they do not volunteer for the program. Second, he proposed using the repatriation flights to better advantage by flying on to their home countries Central Americans detained in both the U.S. and Mexico. Though GOM representatives did not respond enthusiastically to either suggestion, Ramirez Acuna asked INAMI's Commissioner Romero to work with Julie Myers of Immigration and Customs Enforcement to explore ways to improve the program.

Biometrics: More Data Needed

¶12. (SBU) GOM representatives discussed the methods used to verify travelers and merchandise to and through Mexico. Among other initiatives, they noted the implementation of new technologies and the scope of their APIS efforts, which covered 22 airlines and more than 20 million passengers in **¶2006**. Secretary Chertoff agreed that APIS and other GOM measures were working effectively, but noted our desire to broaden biometric exchanges to include the broader capture and exchange of fingerprints. Such exchanges would benefit both countries, he argued.

Cuba/Venezuela: Planning for Future Contingencies

¶13. (SBU) Ramirez Acuna raised the issue of conditions in Cuba and Venezuela and noted the uncertainty in the region in the advent of Fidel Castro's demise, emphasizing Mexico's concerns with a possible mass migration. This should concern the U.S. as well, he noted; the U.S. and Mexico at least need to compare approaches to the potential problem. Secretary Chertoff asked if the Mexican Navy (SEMAR) had developed a plan to deal with a mass migration. Ramirez Acuna said that it had. Secretary Chertoff offered to put our Coast Guard in touch with SEMAR to ensure coordinated contingency planning in this regard.

¶14. (SBU) On Venezuela, the Secretary asked for an assessment of Venezuelan intentions after Castro's demise, noting that Venezuela President Hugo Chavez appeared to be looking for friends among the world's most dangerous powers. Ramirez Acuna stated that the GOM shared the USG's concerns regarding Chavez and was carefully monitoring his reach within the region, as well as within Mexico. Secretary Chertoff noted our concerns that Venezuela had not only shown itself to be hostile to common U.S. - Mexican interests, but that it was careless in issuing travel documents to its citizens and those who purported to be Venezuelans. Secretary Chertoff suggested Mexico might consider adjusting

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its visa policy toward Venezuelans to monitor the influx of Venezuelan document holder more effectively. CISEN's Valdes noted that Mexico was already exercising due diligence of Venezuelan travelers.

¶15. (U) Secretary Chertoff did not have an opportunity to clear this message before leaving Mexico.

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